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The Lone-Wolf Diplomat

Like Herman Wouk's fictional Capt. Pug Henry, Vernon Walters has been everywhere, met everyone and seen virtually everything. He was aide-de-camp to Gen. Mark Clark during the liberation of Rome. He was there when Harry Truman met with an insubordinate Gen. Douglas MacArthur in 1950. His mouth was cut by glass shards as he rode with Vice President Richard Nixon through a rock-throwing mob in Caracas in 1958. When Walters was promoted to full colonel in 1960, Dwight Eisenhower and Charles de Gaulle pinned the eagle insignia on his shoulders. He was the military attaché in Paris who arranged Henry Kissinger's clandestine meetings with North Vietnamese envoy Le Duc Tho, and he survived a narrow brush with Watergate while deputy director of the CIA. As Ronald Reagan's roving ambassador, he has logged an average of 10,000 miles a week in pursuit of secret diplomacy.

Now the 68-year-old Walters is about to emerge from the shadows as the probable successor to United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick ended her second-term soap opera last week by announcing that she could "best serve the president" by writing and speaking out from her academic perch at Georgetown University. Fittingly, Walters was on a low-profile mission through Africa as rumors of his impending appointment swept Washington. With Kirkpatrick's support, he has long hankered after the U.N. job as the capstone to his storybook career. Secretary of State George Shultz is enthusiastic, but objects to Walters's demand for the cabinet rank that usually comes with the job.

Charm: Walters would bring some exceptional skills to the United Nations. His linguistic prowess is legendary: he speaks eight languages fluently, and can switch from a Lisbon to a Brasília accent in the midst of a conversation in Portuguese. The 6-foot-3 Walters, a lifelong bachelor, combines blunt talk with straight-from-the-shoulder charm. He has visited precisely 100 countries for Reagan—the flags of all are standing in his sixth-floor State Department suite—but some of the most valuable entries in his worldwide Rolodex date back to World War II. He met King Hassan II of Morocco in 1942 when he gave the crown prince, then 13 years old, a ride in an Army tank. Walters has nurtured close bonds with South American military leaders since he served as liaison officer to a Brazilian combat brigade in Italy in 1944.

Walters in Honduras (1981): Out of the shadows

Walters's career defies the familiar patterns of both the military and the diplomatic corps. The son of a British-born insurance agent, he was educated in Roman Catholic schools in France and England, but was forced to drop out for financial reasons when he was 16. He entered the Army as a private without even a high-school diploma, and retired 35 years later as a lieutenant general who had never commanded a platoon. He was always a skilled staff aide who used his language abilities as his ticket to a general's stars, serving along the way as part-time translator for five presidents.

AP PHOTOS

With de Gaulle and Ike (1960): 'A character'

At Nixon's side (1969): A storybook career

Walters honed his lone-wolf diplomatic skills in Paris under the tutelage of Kissinger. During the secret negotiations with Le Duc Tho, Walters even commandeered the personal plane of French President Georges Pompidou to help Kissinger keep his mission under wraps. Early in the Reagan years, Walters bypassed channels to communicate directly with Secretary of State Alexander Haig. As a diplomat, Walters can be disarmingly blunt. When he met with Fidel Castro for six hours in 1982, the Cuban leader noted that they both had studied under the Jesuits. "Yes, but I remain faithful," Walters replied. (The remark was a pun in Spanish, since *fidel* means faithful.)

Just seven weeks after Walters moved to the CIA, Nixon chief of staff H. R. Haldeman told him to inform FBI Director L. Patrick Gray that the investigation of the financing of the Watergate break-in was jeopardizing CIA activities in Mexico. Walters complied, explaining in his memoirs that "it simply did not occur to me that . . . [Haldeman] might be asking me to do something illegal or wrong." A few days later White House counsel John Dean suggested to Walters that the CIA provide bail money and pay salaries to the Watergate burglars. This time Walters balked, telling Dean that "I am prepared to resign before I do anything that would implicate the agency in this matter." Gray then requested a formal letter from Walters asking the FBI to suppress its Mexican inquiries. Walters, now certain that no CIA operations were at risk, pointedly declined to write the incriminating letter—and later was rewarded with the Distinguished Intelligence Medal for keeping the CIA out of Watergate.

Skill: Unlike other recent U.N. ambassadors, Walters is neither a global intellectual nor a striped-pants traditionalist. "He's spent his entire adult life in government service, but he hasn't lost his individuality," says a State Department official. "He's a character, and that's a big help in dealing with other characters." Walters's great skill is that he can talk to almost everybody—even the Palestinians during a crisis in the Sudan in 1973—and usually in their own language. The reticent Walters has long prized his ability to pass through airports unnoticed, but he may soon become as conspicuous as O. J. Simpson.

WALTER SHAPIRO with JOHN WALCOTT in Washington

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